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Still no timeline for water restoration in Kanawha Valley

By Ken Ward Jr.

By David Gutman

CHARLESTON, W.Va. -- The fallout from a chemical leak into the Elk River continued to prevent about 300,000 West Virginians from drinking, cooking or washing with the water in their homes on Friday - and company and government officials couldn't say when things might change.

The president of West Virginia American Water said he didn't know when an unprecedented "do not use" water advisory for eight counties and part of a ninth might be lifted. The president of Freedom Industries, where the chemical leak happened, said he didn't know how much of the chemical had leaked into the Elk, about a mile and a half upriver from West Virginia American's water intakes.

"We don't know that the water is not safe, but I can't say that it is safe," West Virginia American President Jeff McIntyre told reporters.

McIntyre said Friday morning that his company knows of no treatment to remove the chemical from water supplies, and that crews would instead have to flush out many miles of service lines - a process he said there was no clear timetable for completing.

The water company may be able to remove the "do not use" order in a piecemeal fashion, but McIntyre said he didn't know how long that would take either.

"I wish I could say a time but I can't," McIntyre said.

The "do not use" water advisory covers all West Virginia American customers in Boone, Clay, Jackson, Kanawha, Lincoln, Logan, Putnam and Roane counties, and in the Culloden area of Cabell County. Customers were told not to use water for anything except flushing toilets and putting out fires.

Gov. Earl Ray Tomblin assured West Virginians that they would have enough bottled drinking water to get through the crisis, and condemned the company responsible for the chemical spill

"This discharge of pollutants is unacceptable," Tomblin said at a Friday afternoon news conference.

He said the West Virginia Bureau of Public Health and National Guard were working on a "long-term" plan to ensure supplies of water and food remain available, if water remains contaminated for days. Distribution sites were open throughout the region.

"If you're low on water, don't panic because help is on the way," Tomblin said. "We're taking every measure to provide water. There is no shortage of bottled water."

President Obama declared a federal disaster before 6 a.m. Friday, and announced that federal emergency aid would be made available to West Virginia.

FEMA spokesman Peter Herrick said the first 20 of an expected 75 tractor-trailer loads of water provided by the relief agency were expected to arrive at West Virginia National Guard headquarters in Charleston at about 8:30 p.m. National Guard officials will then send the water to distribution points throughout the region.

Herrick said the rest of the trucks were expected to trickle in overnight.

Thomas Memorial Hospital in South Charleston and Saint Francis Hospital in Charleston asked people not to come to the hospitals this morning except for "critical or urgent situations."

"But right now, we're not turning anyone away," said Paige Johnson, a spokeswoman for both hospitals.

The hospitals have stockpiled a two- to three-day supply of bottled water, she said.

Charleston Area Medical Center canceled elective surgeries for Friday, and staff members who don't work directly with patients were also asked to stay home Friday, spokesman Dale Witte said.

"We wanted to be able to have as much resources available to the patients and those taking care of the patients as possible," he said.

Three flights were canceled at Charleston's Yeager Airport on Friday, as well as one scheduled to depart early this morning for Washington, D.C.

Labor contracts covering flight crewmembers making overnight stops require that such employees have access to showers and meals, among other necessities, according to Rick Atkinson, Yeager's executive director. "Not having usable water is not suitable for them," he said.

Airport and airline officials on Friday were working out a shuttle system to bring flight crews to hotels in Barboursville, and then back to Charleston. As of late Friday afternoon,

accommodations and shuttles had been lined up for all but one affected flight.

State officials and the water company identified the chemical involved as "Crude MCHM," which is made up mostly of the chemical 4-methylcyclohexane methanol. A "material safety data sheet", or MSDS, for the material warns it could be harmful if swallowed and advises contacting a doctor or poison control officials if it's consumed. The chemical is used in coal processing.

"This is not a chemical that's typical to be in the water treatment process ...," McIntyre said. "The West Virginia Bureau of Public Health is talking to the CDC but I don't know what information they have at this point. But it is not intended to be in water."

McIntyre said he has consulted with an environmental protection lab in Denver, and they only have safety standards for the full strength chemical, not for the chemical as a diluted product.

"We have no idea of the dilution," he said. "[They] didn't have anything to correlate."

Kanawha County Commission President Kent Carper said late Friday he plans to ask the U.S. Chemical Safety Board to investigate the incident, and CSB officials said they were reviewing information about it and would make a deployment decision within 24 hours.

Sen. Jay Rockefeller, D-W.Va., also said he would call for a CSB investigation. He said in a letter to the board that he was "profoundly troubled by [the] chemical spill and am concerned about the problems it is causing hundreds of thousands of West Virginians across nine counties."

U.S. Attorney Booth Goodwin said that his office has opened a criminal investigation of the matter.

"Yesterday's release of a potentially dangerous chemical into our water supply has put hundreds of thousands of West Virginians at risk, severely disrupted our region's economy, and upended people's daily lives," Goodwin said. "We will determine what caused it and take whatever action is appropriate based on the evidence we uncover."

Tomblin said he would direct his lead lawyer, the Division of Homeland Security and the National Guard to conduct an "after action review" of the leak, similar to reviews done after the June 2012 derecho and Superstorm Sandy in October 2012. He said those reviews helped state officials learn how to best distribute water to residents who need it.

Tomblin said it's easier to respond to a disaster that affects a handful of counties.

"One good thing about this is it's a smaller area," Tomblin said. "We don't have 53 counties out at one time. We have supplies, food and water coming in from all parts of the state."

Several area events were canceled, postponed or moved. The Rough N Rowdy Brawl at the Civic Center was postponed until next weekend, and a West Virginia State University basketball game today<co sat> was moved from Institute to Notre Dame of Ohio's campus near Cleveland.

Kanawha County sheriff's deputies were called to Freedom Industries Friday afternoon after someone made a threatening phone call to the facility.

"The guy said he was going to go over there and teach everyone a lesson," said Kanawha Sheriff's Cpl. Brian Humphreys of the Department. He said no one showed up to make good on the threat, but some deputies remained on scene Friday afternoon as a precaution.

Freedom Industries President Gary Southern said late Friday afternoon that the company used vacuum trucks to remove all the contaminated soil that they can and moved it to a storage area to await disposal.

Southern said that the steel tank that leaked held 35,000 gallons of the chemical, but said he still did not know how much leaked into the river, or how the chemical leaked out of the tank and through the containment dike.

Southern's statements about when they discovered the leak and what they did next, conflicted with the accounts given by DEP and other government officials.

"Approximately 10:30 yesterday, two of our employees identified that there was a material leaking from a storage tank in a dike area," he said. "Once this was realized, we reported it to the appropriate authorities and immediately started the remediation process."

DEP was getting complaints about an odor as early as 8:15 a.m. Thursday, and when they arrived at Freedom Industries late Thursday morning, they found that the company had taken "no spill containment measures." DEP said Freedom first reported the spill at 12:05 p.m. Thursday.

Southern said that all of Freedom's efforts have been focused on cleanup since 10:30 a.m. Thursday, but did not directly answer when asked when they halted regular plant operations.

On Friday morning, McIntyre said the water company has had no contact with Freedom Industries. He also didn't know how much of the chemical had leaked.

"I do not know the status but I do not believe it's continuing to flow," he said. "We need to get the water from this plant up to a safe standard...We need to know what the quantities are and what the health risks are for those quantities."

"They did not report this to us and I have no idea when or if they reported it to anyone else," he said.

McIntyre said they first learned that there was a chemical leak just before noon on Thursday and began their standard treatment procedures at that time. Strange licorice odors had been reported since early Thursday morning.

After learning of the chemical leak, the water company was initially working under the assumption that it was a flocculant, common in water treatment. They did not learn the correct identity of the chemical until two hours later, McIntyre said. At 4 p.m. Thursday, the company

realized that the water, even after treatment, still had a licorice odor. That's when they began considering a "do not use" order.

Their standard and emergency water treatments are applicable to chemicals commonly found in water, and were not effective on the chemical that leaked.

Even after the level of contamination is determined, McIntyre said, "water can take hours to days" to flush through the system.

Tomblin said Thursday's chemical spill and aftermath shows the importance of preparing for emergencies -- "at the state, county and city level, but also in our homes."

"Obviously, this is an inconvenience for all of us," Tomblin said. "We'll get through it. We're tough West Virginians."

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